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A NEW EDITION OF COWLEY *

Who now reads Cowley? if he pleases yet,
His moral pleases. not his pointed wit;
Forgot his epic, nay pindaric art,
But still I love the language of his heart.

So wrote Pope in his "Imitations of Horace,"¹ and to-day his question is even more pertinent, for to the modern reader the moral of Cowley's poetry seems tedious, and the "language of his heart" prosy and unnatural. It was not so in his own day, however, for then he was known as "the incomparable Mr. Cowley," that "Prince of Poets," and before the seventeenth century closed, ten editions of his works appeared. Dryden at first admired him extravagantly, called him "the darling of my youth., the famous Cowley," and declared in 1684:² "And (whatever his own Modesty might have advised to the contrary) there is not one careless Stroke of his but what should be kept Sacred to all Posterity. He could write nothing that was not worth the preserving, being habitually a Poet, and always inspir'd."

But fifteen years later, Dryden's enthusiasm moderates and his criticism becomes saner and safer. In a famous passage³ he sets forth clearly those faults in Cowley which, in the generations that followed, have contributed to the almost total neglect of his poetry:

"One of our late great poets is sunk in his reputation, because he could never forgive any conceit which came in his way; but swept, like a drag-net, great and small. There was plenty enough, but the dishes were ill sorted; whole pyramids of sweetmeats for boys and women, but little of solid meat for men. All this proceeded not from any want of knowledge, but of judgment. Neither did he want that in discerning the beauties and faults

*THE WORKS OF ABRAHAM COWLEY, Edited by A. R. Waller, M.A., Cambridge University Press, Macmillan. \$1.50.

¹ II, Epistle I, 75f.

² "Miscellany Poems," Part III, 5th edition, London, 1726, The Publisher to the Reader, p. 223.

³ "Preface to the Fables," Malone, III, 611.

of other poets, but only indulged himself in the luxury of writing; and perhaps knew it was a fault, but hoped the reader would not find it. For this reason, though he must always be thought a great poet, he is no longer esteemed a good writer; and for ten impressions, which his works have had in so many successive years, yet at present a hundred books are scarcely purchased once a twelvemonth; for as my last Lord Rochester said, though somewhat profanely, Not being of God, he could not stand."

Five years before this, in 1694, Addison paid a glowing tribute to Cowley's poetic genius and upright character:⁴

Great Cowley, then, a mighty genius wrote,
O'er-run with wit and lavish of his thought.

Blest Man! whose spotless life and charming lays
Employ'd the tuneful prelate in thy praise.
Blest Man! who now shall be for ever known
It Sprat's successful labors and thy own.

In spite of Dryden's just criticism, Cowley's popularity, though slowly waning, continued through the next century. Before 1725 four editions appeared, followed by five more in the last quarter of the century. But Dr. Johnson's clear and searching analysis of the "mixed wit" of Cowley and of the so-called "metaphysical" poets served still further to place Cowley's poetry on a proper level, so that both Cowper and Lamb feel constrained to speak apologetically of their fondness for the author of the "Mistress."

There, too, enamoured of the life I loved,
writes Cowper,⁵

I studied, prized, and wished that I had known
Ingenious Cowley, and though now reclaim'd
By modern lights from an erroneous taste,
I cannot but lament thy splendid wit
Entangled in the cobwebs of the schools.

⁴"Account of the Greatest English Poets, addressed to Mr. Henry Sacheverell, April 3, 1694."

⁵"The Task," IV, 723.

And Charles Lamb alludes to "a poet very dear to me, the now out-of-fashion Cowley."⁶

In the nineteenth century, after the edition of 1809, no other complete edition of Cowley appeared until that industrious editor, the Rev. A. B. Grosart, published his complete works in the *Chertsey Worthies*, a limited and costly edition, which found its way into very few private libraries.

Though his poetry is now little read, his prose works have been frequently reprinted and edited, and few modern books on prose style fail to include selections from Cowley's essays or from his other prose writings. Dr. Johnson praises Cowley both as a writer of excellent prose and as a critic: "Cowley's critical abilities have not been sufficiently observed: the few decisions and remarks which his prefaces and notes on the 'Davideis' supply, were at that time accessions to English literature and show skill such as raises our wish for more examples."⁷ Again: "No author ever kept his verse and his prose at a greater distance from each other. His thoughts are natural, and his style has a smooth and placid equability which has never yet obtained its due commendation. Nothing is far-sought or hard-laboured; but all is easy without feebleness and familiar without grossness."⁸

All critics are agreed in praising Cowley's translations, which with the exception of the Pindaric Odes, usually exhibit an ease and naturalness foreign to his own original poetry. Dryden highly approved of Cowley's translations and of his method; and Johnson declares: "he was among those who freed translation from servility, and instead of following his author at a distance, walked by his side."⁹

In America Cowley has received his due measure of praise and blame at the hands of William Cullen Bryant¹⁰ and of James Russell Lowell.¹¹ Bryant sums up his criticism in a few sentences (p. 381):

⁶ Letters, Ainger, London, 1888, 2 vols., I, 64.

⁷ "Lives of the English Poets."

⁸ "Ibid."

⁹ "Ibid."

¹⁰ *North American Review*, 124, 368-382.

¹¹ "Essays," 3, 127.

"Cowley's verses have few strains of poetic enthusiasm, and are never pathetic. These are not qualities of poetry which in his day were in fashion. He gave what the age demanded,—sometimes just and often fanciful resemblances and oppositions of images and thoughts, and he had his reward in being ranked as a poet by his contemporaries above all others of his time. That he is no longer read is not surprising."

And Lowell, commenting on Dryden's well-known figure of the drag-net, makes his final estimate as follows:

"Cowley had all the faults that Dryden loads him with, and yet his popularity was to some extent deserved. He had at least a theory that poetry should soar, not creep, and longed for some expedient, in the failure of natural wings, by which he could lift himself away from the conventional and commonplace. By beating out the substance of Pindar very thin, he contrived a kind of balloon which, tumid with gas, did certainly mount a little, into the clouds, if not above them, though sure to come down suddenly with a bump. His odes, indeed, are an alternation of upward jerks and concussions, and smack more of Chaplain than of the Theban, but his prose is very agreeable — Montaigne and water, perhaps with some flavor of the Gascon wine left. The strophe of his ode to Dr. Scarborough, in which he compares his surgical friend, operating for the stone, to Moses striking the rock, more than justifies all Dryden could lay at his door. It was into precisely such mud-holes that Cowley's will-o'-the-wisp had misguided him."

In the period between Ben Jonson and John Dryden, Cowley was undoubtedly the foremost figure in English literature. He was a very prolific writer, and besides his essays and his "Discourse by Way of a Vision," he tried his hand at almost every kind of verse, — lyric, epic, narrative, and dramatic. He wrote in Latin verse a ponderous poem on plants, in six books of more than a thousand lines each; and while at Cambridge composed in the style of Plautus a Latin comedy, *Naufragium Jocularé*. His unfinished epic, the "Davideis," which he "designed in Twelve Books; not for the Tribes sake, but after the Pattern of our Master Virgil," and of which he completed only four books, was merely a sort of university exercise, and proved a dreary

failure; but it was conceived with a moral earnestness and lofty purpose worthy of Milton himself: "Amongst all holy and consecrated things which the Devil ever stole and alienated from the service of the Deity; as Altars, Temples, Sacrifices, Prayers, and the like; there is none that he so universally, and so long usurpt, as Poetry. It is time to recover it out of the Tyrant's hands, and to restore it to the Kingdom of God, who is the Father of it. It is time to Baptize it in Jordan, for it will never become clean by bathing in the Water of Damascus."¹² "All the Books of the Bible," he continues, further on in this Preface,¹³ "are either already most admirable, and exalted pieces of Poesie, or are the best Materials in the world for it. Yet, though they be in themselves so proper to be made use of for this purpose; None but a good Artist will know how to do it: neither must we think to cut and polish Diamonds with so little pains and skill as we do Marble. For if any man design to compose a Sacred Poem, by only turning a story of the Scripture, like Mr. Quarles's, or some other goodly matter, like Mr. Heywood of Angels, into Rhyme; He is so far from elevating of Poesie, that he only abases Divinity. In brief, he who can write a prophane Poem well, may write a Divine one better. . . . I am far from assuming to myself to have fulfilled the duty of this weighty undertaking: But sure I am, that there is nothing yet in our Language (nor perhaps in any) that is in any degree answerable to the Idea that I conceive of it. And I shall be ambitious of no other fruit from this weak and imperfect attempt of mine, but the opening of a way to the courage and industry of some other persons, who may be better able to perform it thoroughly and successfully."

Thus Cowley was the first to undertake in English a religious epic on a grand scale, and though he failed to measure up to his task, as he modestly tells us himself, yet in his Puritanical zeal and in his revolt against the licentious poetry of the Cavaliers, or those who "sport with Amaryllis in the shade," he was no unworthy predecessor of the great Puritan poet, who only nine years later began the composition of the *Paradise Lost* (See my

¹² Waller's edition, pp. 12-13.

¹³ "Ibid," p. 14.

study of the "Davideis" in the *Journal of Germanic Philology*, Vol. III).

This edition of Mr. A. R. Waller contains all of Cowley's poetical works save those verses and translations which appear in his essays. A companion volume, also edited by Mr. Waller, is in press and will be issued soon. It will contain "the miscellaneous prose contents of the 1668 folio, including 'Several Discourses by way of Essays in Verse and Prose,' Cowley's juvenile writings not collected by him, and his English plays. The two volumes will thus contain the whole of Cowley's English writings: it is not intended to reprint his Latin works in this edition" (p. vi).

The text is that of the first collected edition of Cowley's works, the folio of 1668, collated with the folio of 1656, the 1663 volume, and the edition of the "Mistress," 1647. The editing is done with painstaking care and scrupulous accuracy, and the work of the Cambridge Press is well-nigh perfect. Though nothing is said of biographical, bibliographical, and critical apparatus to accompany the second volume, it is hoped that Mr. Waller will make his edition complete by adding this necessary material.

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